

**30<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2012**

**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF HEALTH, HOUSING AND ADULT SERVICES**

**COMMUNITY ACTION: REVIEWING PROGRESS AND AGREEING NEXT STEPS**

**EMPLOYMENT, ENTERPRISE AND WELFARE ADVICE**

**UPDATE ON FIRST TIER CONTRACTS**

**1.0 Why has it come to Committee?**

- 1.1 The report provides an update of progress against agreed actions in the current year's (2011/12) Work Plan, see annex 1. The action is outlined in the Committee work plan priority 'Employment, enterprise and welfare rights', issue two.

**2.0 Background**

- 2.1 East Area Committee's work plan includes an action in relation to access to employment, enterprise and welfare rights, the aim being to increase employment and enterprise opportunity within the East area.
- 2.2 It was agreed to embark on a short programme of Committee updates and discussions over the year to allow Committee members to receive information and influence developments at key points within the service improvement activity.
- 2.3 It was further agreed to present an update report to Area Committee meeting outlining progress to date on the 1<sup>st</sup> tier contracts, please see below for a synopsis.

**3.0 Current Position**

- 3.1 Sunderland City Council contracts to Advice Providers across the city to provide a casework service and to provide time limited interventions which resolve or close issues; or offer an intervention that would prevent an issue escalating; whilst seeking to empower customers and build confidence and independence to deal with welfare rights issues.

It can also involve the accurate identification of specialist support needs (includes identifying appeals with merits) and referral to the appropriate specialist service.

The current contracts fund a casework service which covers the provision of first tier welfare rights advice in the following categories of social welfare law: welfare benefits, debt, housing and employment. However 92% of customers advised seek advice and assistance to claim their full benefit entitlement.

- 3.2 Age UK have contracts for 2 out of 5 lots which includes the contract for the East of the city. At the outset of the contract it was agreed to re-brand Age UK to ensure that local residents under 50 did not feel excluded from accessing the advice provision. For all customers seen under the contract, Age UK was renamed Sunderland Advice Service. (SAS)

All five current first tier contracts have been in place since August 2010 and will end in August 2012. The procurement process is about to start so that we can have new contracts in place by August 2012. Age UK under the name SAS will have an opportunity to bid once again for the contract in the East of the city, along with all other interested advice providers.

- 3.3 SAS has reported generally an increase in demand in the number of customers, seeking advice and assistance in the East of the city. This can partly be explained by the continuing economic down turn and the impact of the largest scale welfare reform in the last 60 years.
- 3.4 SAS is based at Stockton Road in the centre of town but has increased outreach provision to ensure residents who are unable to travel and many of the most vulnerable or 'hard to reach' customers can access provision it holds outreach sessions in the Bangladeshi centre and the Community Link. In addition they have developed a specifically branded website and undertaken some work to promote, develop and update it. The aim of this is to encourage customers to self serve where they are in a position to do so.
- 3.5 Before the contract was awarded, SAS identified the most vulnerable groups in the East and these included older people, young families, those with long term health problems/ disabilities, the unemployed, 25-44 age group at risk of poverty, families in poverty, the BME communities and the economically inactive. SAS attend the Community Link Shop in Hendon, the Bangladeshi Centre.

Since April 2011, SAS have advised 3,783 customers in the East of the city. Q2 identified a 17% increase in demand as compared to Q1. The figures for Q3, including December are still to be published but it is clear that demand for the service is increasing.

99% of customers are defined as either unemployed or retired.

- 3.6 SAS cite examples of customers with severe and enduring mental health issues who once assisted by them feel more financially secure and then reporting a reduction in the severity of their symptoms. SAS have also developed links with the emerging Polish community.
- 3.7 As SAS are not part of the council they are in a position help customers challenge decisions about council tax benefit or housing benefit. SAS have also advised on an increase in queries of worried customers who are concerned about the impact on their income when the benefit Disability Living Allowance is reformed.

#### **4.0 Next Steps**

- 4.1 Under the new contracts the first tier will have an important part to play in delivering the new Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) model. Contracted providers will have to manage increased local demand with no increase in resources. Sunderland City Council as part of its Community Leadership role will expect first tier providers to deliver Responsive Local Services, tailored to local needs which are responsive to the customers' needs in their local area.
- 4.2 Resources under the new contract will be focused on to welfare rights casework and first tier providers will need to demonstrate their active contribution to and promotion of self serve and mediated self serve options for those people able to meet their needs in

these ways. This approach is intended to increase the reach and accessibility of information to the general public but specifically target those most in need. .

- 4.3 SCC will meet with all providers interested in tendering for the contract on 24<sup>th</sup> January 2012 to brief on the contract specification, which will include SCC commitment to Responsive Local Services and the Information, Advice and Guidance model. It is expected that new contracts for the 5 lot areas, including the East will be completed by April 2012.

## **5.0 Recommendation**

- 5.1 Committee is request to: Support the delivery of advice in a locally responsive way through the first tier contract process.
- 5.2 Continue to receive updates on the work and outcomes achieved by the first tier contracts, particularly in light of welfare reforms

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### **Annex 1**

Sunderland East Work Plan 2011-12